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THE VOICE OF A POET

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THE VOICE OF A POET

BEING ENGLISH RENDERINGS FROM THE
TAMIL ORIGINALS OF POEMS BY
SUBRAMANYA BHARATI

BHARATI TAMIL SANGHAM
CALCUTTA

ENGLISH RENDERINGS BY
Vinay Avasthi Sahib Bhuvan Vani Trust Donations
Sri C. Rajagopalachari
Dr. J. H. Cousins
Prof. K. Swaminathan
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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

"Just as in ancient days, Vyasa and Valmiki served human progress and culture, Poet Subramanya Bharati has served the Tamils in recent times by his writings. There can be no limit to reading Bharati's poems. The more they are read, the more do they bestow sweetness and benefit". Thus wrote Sri C. Rajagopalachari, the veteran political and cultural leader of India in his message to the Sangham when he was Governor of West Bengal. His successor to the office, Dr. Kailas Nath Katju, made a vigorous plea "that it is in the national interest that the works of the national poets like Bharati should be widely translated in Sanskrit and all regional languages so that they may inspire all our country-men throughout the length and breadth of India." He hoped that the Bharati Tamil Sangham of Calcutta would take a lead in this matter and make Bharati Sahitya available to the people living outside Tamil Nad.

We decided to act on this advice and convened a conference of the representatives of all associations in North India similar to ours, in December 1950, in Calcutta, at the time of the Bharati Jayanti celebrations. Representatives of the Delhi Tamil Sangham, New Delhi, Bombay Tamil Sangham, Bombay, The Kalai Kazhaham, Poona, the Madrassi Sammelani, Jamshedpur, the South Indian Association, Golmuri and the South Indian Association, Kharagpur, attended the conference. We were very fortunate in having as the president of the conference a distinguished scholar and critic in the person of Professor A. Srinivasa Raghavan, then Professor of English, Vivekananda College, Madras, and now Principal of the V. O. Chidambaram College, Tuticorin. It was unanimously resolved during this conference that a first book of translations in English of some of Bharati's poems should be brought out this year. Accordingly, Professor Raghavan was entrusted with the responsibility of arranging for the translations. A committee was also formed to be in charge of the work and Professor Raghavan was elected its chairman.

We feel happy that it has been possible to bring out this book. We should express our gratitude to the

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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Government of Madras who now hold all the rights over Bharati's works, and to Sri C. Rajagopalachari and Dr. James H. Cousins who have permitted us to include two of their translations in this publication. For the other translations, we are indebted to Professor A. Srinivasa Raghavan, Mrs. H. Jesudasan, Sri P. N. Appuswami and Professor K. Swaminathan.

To the several associations in North India which have cooperated with us and helped us, we are deeply indebted.

Our thanks are due to the Central Art Press, Chetput, Madras, for getting the book printed so well in an incredibly short time.

We are deeply grateful to our revered leader Sri C. Rajagopalachari for the foreword.

Calcutta
12—12—1951

BHARATI TAMIL SANGHAM

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FOREWORD

As in architecture or painting, the beauty of lyric or other poetry is in its form, not in the bricks or stones the builder uses or the colours the painter's brush picks up to make the picture. Even the emotions that go to form the substance of a poem are so intimately blended with the form that it is as difficult to translate it as it is to rebuild a pomegranate fruit or an orange or a rose. Although the highest literature transcends regionalism and through it, when we are properly attuned, we can realise the essential oneness of the human family, in most cases so long as that family is divided into nations, literature cannot escape the effects of such a division. Literature is closely related to life. The realities of life are idealised by genius and given the form that makes drama, poetry or even great prose. That form perishes when translated from one language into another. The material part of the narrative or the thought can of course be conveyed, but poetry does not lie there. At the most, the scientific curiosity of the student of comparative literature may be satisfied, but the function of poetry is outside that field. Most healthy men and women are alike if we gather and compare information about their height and other physical particulars, but beauty is of infinite variety.

These are the considerations which always depress me when friends approach me with a proposal to present Bharati to outsiders through English. But their ambition is honest and laudable and although they may not see the imperfections in effect on the English reader's mind, their own intimate knowledge of the original persuades them to be happy with the effort. There is a great deal of vanity in all human endeavour and it is unnecessary to emphasise it. Perhaps I have gone too far even here.

Bharati sang during the most ardent period of India's political growth when deliverance from foreign rule was far too far away even to be seen as a speck in the horizon. It was undoubtedly in the horizon when Gandhi came into the scene. Bharati ended when that happened. The

body of national thought that he wove into song was that which preceded Gandhi; it was Vivekananda's and Dadhabhai Naoroji's and Tilak's India, and not that which most of the present-day admirers of India's struggle may have in mind, that form the material of Bharati's poetry.

Madras
8-12-1951

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

I agree.

This note has made any apology from me unnecessary.

But we love Bharati. And love is blind, utterly so to its own imperfections. Still, there is no wisdom higher than love.

EDITOR

INTRODUCTION

A NOTE ON TAMIL LITERATURE

In the far south of our country, in a strip of land some 600 miles long between the Western Ghats and the eastern sea lies the home of the Tamils. It is an ancient land, some say it extended into the Indian Ocean as part of the now submerged continent of Lemuria, a land with a highly cultivated language and a literature over two thousand years old. The earliest Tamil literature now available is all of it in verse and contains an astonishing wealth of poetry. It has all the vigour and directness of early work. The poet of those days wrote with his eye on the panorama of life and was concerned more with the aspects of things and man's emotional response to them than with philosophic speculation. The air is clear and unclouded and we see a thousand and one details of the land and the people springing to life at the voice of the poet. The dark rain clouds sail from the north-east, cranes come white-winged and coral-beaked beating against them and the green shoots up from the glad earth. The sun returns, the hunting dog strains at the leash, the elephant tramples on the bamboo copse and the amla leaf flutters in the golden light. In the hospitable courts of kings, poets gather and sing of the livableness of life and *panars* (minstrels) with white flowers on their *yal* scatter love and joy and beauty with their songs. Chieftains go out on their campaigns, decked in garlands, and on the burning pyre, their bodies are laid on *kusa* grass, broken with a sword, and burnt.

The themes of these poems are generally war and love. In the love poems, a wonderful symbolism, delicate and restrained, is the accepted mode and is evidence of the richly developed state of literary expression. This is to be expected because the poems of those days were written in the courts of kings and chieftains and under the aegis of *Sangams* or literary academies. An unusual blending of directness with symbolism, vividness, concreteness, freedom from over-refined speculation and the impedimenta of theological terms—these are the qualities of this early work. The poems are ancient but have

literature took refuge in the matalayams or the monastic houses of religious orders or in the courts of petty chieftains, and interested itself in arid theological hair splittings or in erotic vulgarity and sensuousness. During this period, however, the impact of Islam and Christianity gave Tamil a few works based on Islamic and Christian beliefs, works like *Seera Puranam* dealing with the life of the Prophet Muhammad and *Tempavani* by the foreign missionary Father Beschi on the life and teachings of Christ.

The modern period may be said to have begun here. With the mounting tide of nationalism early in this century, the Tamils began to look back with pride on their past and set about freeing the present from the degradation that had set in. Bharati, the poet, was the voice of this newly-awakened national consciousness. He is the father of the present era in Tamil and though it is now thirty years since he passed away, his influence is still powerful. He rescued Tamil literature from the stagnation of the matalayams and the petty courts of zamindars and brought it into the main current of national life. Tamil verse regained its vigour and naturalness and a new Tamil prose, direct, plastic and functional was born. Contact with English and through it with the vast treasures of modern European thought had expanded the horizon and Tamil literature today is marked by a rich renascent activity. It has returned to its old secularism and democratic outlook without, however, losing its eclecticism and the wealth of tradition built through it. Novels, short stories, plays and a new literary criticism based on the aesthetics of the west have all come into being and work of a high literary quality is being produced. Tamil Literature is very much alive today; it is the voice of over thirty million people; it has a great past to inspire it and a vital present and ... but who can look into the future?

BHARATI'S POETRY

In a poem, *Moonlight, Stars and the Wind*, Bharati speaks of the secret of his poetry: 'Here he comes, the angel of the wind, bringing to my ears the thousand and one sounds of men's life on the earth. There is the voice of a bell swinging towards me, a dog barks, a beggar cries piteously for a handful of rice, somebody slams the street door, from the east floats the wailing of a conch, men talk and argue and quarrel, a child weeps, —ah, who can count the notes that the wind brings? I sit and weave them all joyously into songs.' Bharati never 'sat himself in a lonely place' like Tennyson's poet, nor was he one of those music-makers who seek 'lone sea-breakers' and 'desolate streams'. His place was with his people in the paddy field and the bazaar and to them he spoke: 'Brethren, mute, deaf and blind, listen to me, I bring the healing word.' To him as to Chandi Das, the Bengali singer, 'man was the highest truth' and Reality itself was a flame in the innermost shrine of the human will, a flame self-lit and self-illuminating. This absorption in human life makes Bharati's poetry stand firmly on the earth. The poet looked around and saw the degradation and misery that political bondage had wrought on his countrymen; and from his agonised heart poured forth words instinct with life and of an amazingly wide range. He defined the ideal: 'Here in our own land, we shall no more be slaves of the stranger, no, nor endure this living death'. This is political freedom but of what use is it if it does not bring with it to the lowest among the thousand and one castes of Hindu society liberation from the age-long oppression of privileged birth, and to the backward and the poor, escape from ignorance and want? And he sang:

Freedom, freedom, freedom!

To the pariahs, the tiyas, the pulayars, freedom,

To the paravas, the kuravas, the maravas, freedom!

* * *

If there is no bread for one, even one,

We shall smash the world.

Again, the women of his land, dumb, unlettered, moving about as chattels in their own homes caught his

eye and like Walt Whitman, he became 'the poet of the woman the same as the man', feeling like him that 'it is as great to be a woman as to be a man, ... there is nothing greater than the mother of men':

*Praise be to the mother!
Dance and proudly sing 'Praise be to her!'
Ho there, beat the drum, beat,
Breathe life into the pipes golden sweet,
And your voices raise:
'Praise be to women, praise.'*

The political freedom that Bharati defines is thus synonymous with social equality and economic justice. In turning the minds of his countrymen to this ideal, Bharati employed all the capacity of a poet for mood and expression. He could be sad and moving like Leopardi, intoning a dirge over the glory of the past or he could speak of it in such rousing accents that the accumulated wisdom and strength of the ages came to life in the passing moment, giving it the irresistible validity of the eternal. He could lash out furiously at indifference, self-seeking and meanness, with a biting irony like Heine's. He could be assured and serene like Shakespeare's John of Gaunt, affirming with boundless faith his country's great destiny. In India's struggle for freedom, while politicians were fighting against the foreigner's law and statute and armed might, the poet fought the harder fight against the languor of the spirit. He gave his brethren the vision without which a people perish and the will without which a vision is but an idle dream. It is not surprising that, to the Tamils, Bharati is primarily the *desiya Kavi*, the nationalist poet.

But Bharati is a poet, with all the poet's passion for beauty. 'I sing' he says simply, 'because I have drunk deep of the ambrosial wine blended of the moonlight, stars and the wind'. But he brews the wine himself in the vats of his intuition and thus even the common crow, that clumsily moving dark blotch in the bright sunlight, is to him 'passing sweet to the eye.' His poems are rich with the sights and sounds of the earth—the red laugh of the wild flower on the ash heap, the swinging dart of the sparrow, morning-light filling the grass-land, 'a flood of molten gold, sweet as honey,' the palm-branch swaying and waking silver ripples in the moonlight, the long,

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long snake basking in the sun, rivers swinging down to the sounds of their own music, the tiger testing its voice in the gamut of terror, the friendly roundelays of birds, the fiercely glad tumult of the monsoon. Writing with his eye on the object and with an unerring sense of the emotive or picturesque detail, Bharati revived the ancient *Sangam* poet's fidelity to nature and yet in his descriptions, there is a fairy light, indefinable and elusive, a Merlin's gleam flashing behind the veil. It is not the beauty of leaf or flower, of the world of eye and ear that is of primary moment to Bharati. It is the spirit of infinite loveliness running like fire beneath the coloured ash of appearance that he touches; and in one ecstatic moment, Beauty and Truth become one and we are made aware of

a sense sublime

*Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and the mind of man.*

Strange as it may seem, Bharati, the poet of re-surgent nationalism, the knight of the downtrodden and the poor, the singer of the beauty of the earth, is a mystic. The very intensity with which he shared the joys and sorrows of his fellowmen and with which he sought beauty in all things lead him to the outer edge of phenomena, to the beyond. He is querulous, he fights against the current, clinging to the earth. 'I want to sing,' he cries,

*'Sing and sear with a song
The sickness and poverty of the land;
Sing and forge with a song
The peoples of the earth into one love-knit band.*

* * *

*And then, the Mother's voice is heard:
'No, my poet, sing of Me'.*

He turns to sing of rain, 'this miracle of the descent of heaven's waters' but he finds that his words

stray away

*They sing 'Victory to her !
The wind and the rain, they are the Mother's play.'*

His very life-force sweeps him on to the uncharted sea. Once there, like the true mystic, he traces the

chart of it on the earth. In his *Kannan Pattu* (Kannan Songs) and in the lyrics to *Para Sakti* (Transcendent Mother), he moulds a thousand symbols out of the common clay to express the ineffable. The great Tamil mystical tradition of the Alwars and Nayanmars is behind him and though he owes a great deal to them, the individuality of his mystical work is unquestioned. He does not leave the earth to lose himself in the sky; on the other hand, he looks lovingly at the earth and finds the sky reflected in it. Plato spoke of love as being 'the interpreter and mediator between God and man.' To Bharati, not love alone but all human relationships are messengers of the timeless. He uses them all as symbols speaking of them with frankness, yet with the power to make the pulsations of the earth beat to the flow of spiritual experience. The concretisations employed by earlier Hindu mystics, the body of *puranic* legend, are also woven by him into the poems. The result is poetry of a wonderful richness and suggestion, sensuous, passionate and yet shot through with spiritual travail and triumph. The many-coloured dome of life rises before the eye as the visible temple of the white radiance of eternity.

Bharati was a singer, not a writer of poems. Most of his poetical work has not merely the tidal movement of rhythm that all poetry has but the wave beats that mark the simple song. In fact, many of his lyrics are set to music and sung over the length and breadth of the Tamil country. Also, Bharati employs a language disarmingly simple, so direct and simple indeed that to translate him seems easy enough till one attempts it. Bharati works his magic with inflexions of the Tamil idiom and creates a shining interspace between word and word clearly perceived by one whose mother-tongue is Tamil but incapable of being rendered easily in another language.

This is the age of Bharati in Tamil literature. He was a pioneer in many fields of literary expression. He brought into being a prose that captures all the ease, naturalness and flexibility of the spoken word. He wrote short stories, sketches and fables—all of them of great merit. He attempted a novel. He has left behind a delightful bunch of essays, both 'loose sallies of the mind' and detached objective excursions into the realm of

ideas. But his greatest achievement lies in the field of poetry. For centuries, after the great epic poet, Kamban, Tamil poetry had remained practically barren. Large numbers of works were written in verse, no doubt, during the period; but most of them were idle panegyrics of petty chieftains or clever artificial elaborations of erotic formulae. The few that were touched with sincerity and purpose were the works of saints like Pattinatar and Tayumanavar and these had breathed a chilling otherworldliness alien to Tamil or had lost clarity and vigour in a cloud of pseudo-mystical symbolism. Tamil poetry had cut itself off from life and buried itself in ornate inanities, in religiosity and in theological hair-splittings, that is to say, it had ceased to be poetry. It was in this flat, spiritless world that Bharati was born and by the time he died in 1921 at the early age of thirty-nine, he had accomplished a miracle. He had freed Tamil poetry from the affectation and pedantry of pundits, the religiosity of the *sthala puranas* and the obscurities of arid, theological posing. He had it planted firmly on this earth, had fed it with the joys and sorrows of men and by securing for it sincerity and truth had enabled it in the only manner possible, to reach out in its large, life-embracing sweep from realism towards reality. He had substituted experience for formulae, expression for ornamentation, vision for catch-phrases and iridescent song-contours for dull word-piles; and the spirit of poetry, alert and aware, was reborn in the Tamil land.

A. S. RAGHAVAN

MODERN

Of these English renderings *Freedom* is by Sri C. Rajagopalachari, *A Gopi-Song to Sri Krishna* by Dr. J. H. Cousins, *On Liberty* by Mrs. H. Jesudasan, *Kannamma—My Love* by Sri P. N. Appuswami, and *Kannan—My Servant* by Prof. K. Swaminathan. The others are by the Editor.

FREEDOM

A poem characteristic of one phase of Bharati's work—that of awakening the passion for freedom and the consciousness of equality and unity in a land torn for centuries by foreign rule and sharp caste divisions. The pariahs, the tiyas and the pulayas mentioned in the poem formed the lowest rung in the Hindu social ladder while the paravas (fishermen), the kuravas (nomadic hunters) and the maravas (originally a fighting caste that sank in later days to the position of 'criminal tribes') were only a little above them in status.

The Tamil original of the poem has a vigour, lilt and song quality that cannot be captured in an English rendering. It was sung all over the Tamil land in the days of the nationalist struggle. Its influence in rousing the democratic sense of the masses has been immeasurable.

Freedom, freedom, freedom !
To the Pariahs, to the Tiyas, to the Pulayas,
freedom !
To the Paravas, to the Kuravas, to the Maravas,
freedom !
Come, let us labour all,
Sparing naught and hurting none,
Walking in the way of Truth and Light.
There shall be none of low degree,
And none shall be oppressed.
Born in India, all are of noble birth.

Wealth and learning—may they flourish,
With joy of mind, let us live
Like brothers all alike.
Perish ignorance !
In man and woman, alike,
No more of subordination.
In every walk of life equality.
Man and woman shall equal be
In this land of ours.
Freedom, freedom, freedom !
To the Pariahs, to the Tiyaas, to the Pulayas,
freedom,
To the Paravas, the Kuravas, the Maravas,
freedom !

Viduthalai, Viduthalaĩ, Viduthalaĩ.

A GOPI-SONG TO SRI KRISHNA

A mystical lyric expressing the poet's intuition of Beauty. The symbolism is borrowed from the *Bhagavata* and is that of the Gopi (the maid of the pastures) led by intense love to realise Sri Krishna, the Divine Cowherd of Brindavan.

Some one spake of moon and sun;
But for me in love grown wise,
Through the dark and light made one
Only shone your searching eyes.

What, to those who never knew,
Was the mid-night sky's expanse,
Looked my throbbing spirit through
With your comprehending glance.

And the long cloud-tressed air
That to others moved beyond,
Wrapped me in your silken hair
Gemmed with pearl and diamond.

Now along the flowery grove
By the champak's odorous pile,
Eyes made vision-full by love
See your deep alluring smile.

Koel's note from tree to tree
Speaks your voice with sweetest smart,

And the dark blue rolling sea
Tells the pulsing of your heart.

And for me my happy doom
Shines upon your ageless face,
Bride of your eternal bloom
Held in your divine embrace.

Chuttum vizhi chudarithan

OUR WILD MOTHER

An unusual poem. The concept of India as the mother is worked into the idea very familiar to the Indian people—that of Para Sakti, the Force Transcendent, the Mother. Thus India is subtly realised as a primal power, irresistible, fierce, inscrutably beautiful.

Our mother is a spirit wild,
A spirit mad and stark;
Her lover, he hugs the searing flame
And dances in the dark.¹

Waves of melody heave and eddy
In the fairy sea of song;
She leaps and laves in the spin of the waves
And rides their crest along.

In the woodland bright of the poet's light
Blow buds divinely sweet;
She clasps them to her and with beauty drunk,
She reels on tripping feet.

She's conned the parts of a thousand arts
And sown them o'er the earth.
Behold, she sings and the Veda² rings,
Her trident conquers death.

¹ Lord Siva who carries the fire in his hand and is the Lord of Cosmic Dance.

² The Vedas are the most ancient and sacred of Hindu Scriptures.

In the war of wars, she springs as the might
 In the bend of Partha's bow¹;
 She leaps to kill and slakes her will
 With the blood of the cloven foe.

Peyaval kan engal annai

¹ The war of wars is the epic war of the Mahabharata. Partha is Arjuna, the great Pandava prince and archer, one of the heroes who fought in the war.

AWAKE, MOTHER

India, the mother, is awakened here from the slumber of centuries by the poet. The poem is modelled on a traditional Tamil poetic form called *Tiru-palli-ezhuchi* in which a devotee is represented as praying to the Lord to wake up, that is, to come into his consciousness.

It is dawn.

The dark shades of evil have fled

Routed by our penance.

And the sun of Light

Has flung his young golden beams across the
world.

Thousands on thousands of thy sons

Are gathered here to pay thee homage,

To bless thy name and to serve thee.

How strange that thou shouldst be wrapt in
sleep !

Awake, mother, awake !

The birds are loud,

And loud and joyous the voice of the drum.

Freedom swells everywhere in a pæan;

The white conch is tumultuous,

And crowds surge in the highways.

The clear-visioned and pure of heart

Chant the Word of God and thy holy name.

Wake up, mother,

Dearer than life, than life-giving Amrita,¹
 Awake, mother, awake.

We have seen the sun's conquering light filling
 the sky;
 We yearn, like the parched earth for rain,
 To see thy glory fill the earth.
 Look, we have brought our hearts
 As flower offerings to deck thy feet.
 Thou who gavest the Vedas,
 And sciences innumerable,
 Their sweep curving beyond the bourne of words.
 Thou who wielded the trident,
 Striking terror into the dark ones,
 Oh, unstained, soul of purity, mother,
 Awake !

Dost thou not know we are all athirst
 For the grace that wells in thy eye?
 Golden one, daughter of the spirit of white
 Himachal,²
 How long, oh, how long are we to wait?
 What more of penance are we still to do?
 Thou sleepest yet, is it fair?
 Life sweet, mother, awake.

Thy children are calling to you
 And thou a mother, couldst thou sleep?

¹ Amrita, food of the gods, believed to have the power to confer immortality.

² Himachal, literally the snow mountain, is the Himalayas. Himavan or the Spirit of the Snow Mountain, is, according to Hindu Purana, the father of Parvati, consort of Lord Siva.

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Did ever mother's heart fail to melt at the
prattle of the child?

Queen, Sovereign Bharat,

We stand singing thy praise in the eighteen
tongues of thy realm;

Come, mother, shed on us thy grace and lift us to
the good.

Fount of our life, mother, awake.

Pozhuthu pularnthathu

TO LIBERTY

Though torn away from the warmth of home,
In prison-cell I pine,
Though rank and wealth do fade and leave
Reproaches only mine,
Though griefs on griefs crowd without end
And shake and shatter me,
Dear goddess, Freedom, never would I
Forget to bow to thee.

Though he of rare gifts possessed,
Who hath not found thy grace,
Though infinite learning comes to lift
Him far above his race,
Though he be mighty, high in fame,
Dear goddess, without thee,
Like a corpse jewel-adorned, his life
A dreary waste must be.

Goddess ! Could it be called a land
The land bereft of thy light?
What strength is there, what knowledge, zeal,
What spirit, wisdom bright?
What poetry, scriptures, or what arts,
Cherished and divine?
Goddess, they have sinned who have lost
The good that's only thine.

Their sickness grows on them, they lose
The fire that is life's zest;

Ranked with the beasts, behold, they stand
 Even to them a jest.
 No joy for them e'en in dreams; their life
 Untouched by nobility.
 Goddess, mother, they've lost all grace
 Because they know not thee.

Idhamtharu manayin neengi

RAIN

The Tamil original is a marvel conveying through the sound and movement of words the gladness and terror and tumult of far-flung rain.

Shattering the bounds of space

Came the rain:

Dheem tarikita dheem tarikita dheem tarikita
dheem!¹

The hills are rent,

And the waters burst and leap and sweep in a
mad race;

The wind beats like a fiend in pain;

The world reels and is bent:

Dham tarikita dheem tarikita dham tarikita
dheem!

Lightning leaps in a clap,

And the sea

Dashes its mane against Heaven's dome;

The clouds break and rumble;

The wind tears at the sky as at a trap,

And the sky beats a tattoo and laughs in mad
spree.

¹ These are not words. They are merely transliterations of rhythmic sounds taken by the poet from the scores employed for playing the mridanga (drum).

The corners of space crumble.
Oh, the mighty rain! Dham tarikita dheem
tarikita dhom!

The universe quivers and shakes,
And lo! the snake¹
That bears the earth, hoods uplifted, springs
amain.
Space hills leap,
And in the sky, the tumult of the Devas² breaks
Into a mad sport where live flames crash awake.
Behold! Time and the elements dance in a
sweep:
Tatarikita tittom! Oh, the rain, the wondrous
rain!

Dhikkuhal ettum sithari

¹Adishesha, the thousand-hooded snake, believed to be carrying the earth.

²The immortal gods, dwellers in Swarga.

EVENING

Caw ! It is the crow.

In the sky the flame doth glow.

Caw, Caw !

The crows dark with beauty, passing sweet
to my eye,

From branch to branch, they rove and cry.

They crowd

And wander into the cloud.

Look, in the west,

The Mother has donned the crescent in her
crest.

The parrot, a dream,

Leaps in the palm, with a scream;

And a little swallow, with a start,

In a swinging flash into space doth dart.

Two kingly kites swim round

And sail into the far without a sound.

In the street crows the cock;

Shakti Vel is the burden of its talk;¹

The red fades amain

And the honeyed moonlight falls, far-flung,
a bright rain.

On the terrace high,

She comes, my love, a smile on her lips, the
moonlight in her eye.

¹The cock is the emblem on the flag of Lord Subramanya (son of Lord Siva) and the Vel (long spear) is his weapon.

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'Great is woman.' To the truth I woke.
 'Great and good is woman's love', I spoke.
 At its sight
 Life springs and leaps on the mount of
 honour bright.
 Wisdom grows
 And on the earth poetry glows.
 'Wondrous', I cry, and raise
 Her hand gently to my eyes in praise.
 Peace came my way
 As her voice swelled and flowed into a lay:

SONG

They draw intricate patterns on the floor
 With coloured dust.
 They light the lamp in the dark of the shrine
 And stand in trust.
 Stand in a row, fold their hands and sing:
 'Mother, glory be Thine.'
 Poor souls, they know not they pour dark
 In the darkness of the shrine.
 Come out into the open, friends,
 Spread out before your eye,
 The fair world lies. They are the Mother,
 This fair world and the sky.
 The way to know is, yea, to light the lamp
 And hold it high above.
 But the lamp is the lamp of wisdom
 And the shrine is love.

Ka enru katthidum kakkai

FIRE

To the *Rishis* (Seers) of the Vedic days *Agni* (the fire on the altar) was the messenger of the gods and his light the power that scattered the *Asuras* or the dark forces of evil.

Rishis:

On our altar, the flame springs free,
And the ghosts seared and routed flee.
Fire, oh, the fire!

Asuras:

Ah, into the core of our being it lashes,
Our dark sanctuary is burnt to ashes.
Fire, ah, the fire!

Rishis:

Fire has come, the golden-hued,
And Asura hordes are all subdued,
Shrivelled and scattered;
He lifts his hands to Heaven high,
Ushas,¹ wisdom-limbed, is nigh,
Darkness is shattered.

Asuras:

We throve in contempt of Indra's might,
But the Vedic word that puts us to flight,
Alas, man has learnt.

¹ Goddess of the dawn.

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In this dark wood we have lived for ages,
Fire has come now and the song of the sages,
Asura strength is burnt.

Rishis:

Like a bull ranging in the forest wild,
Rages the fire. Our foes are piled,
In the midden of the brute.
Fire, the mighty, has opened his lips;
Fire, the first of the gods, gently sips
Honey and ghee and fruit.

Asuras:

We held men puny but ah, now,
They have found, we know not how,
Truth's conquering lore.
Our life is fled, consciousness shed,
And the strong fire leaps a flaming red
On our bodies inert and sore.

Rishis:

Fire sits throned on our body and life
And spirit. To stand by us in strife,
The gods have come to earth.
Wherever we turn, altars burn,
Soma¹ rains on hearts that yearn,
We have vanquished death.

Engal velvikkudam eethil

¹ A drink of the Vedic days.

FOR THESE I PRAY

Speak, Mother!¹

Who will make a vina² only to smother
Its tunefulness in the dust?

Speak, Mother! Having made me first,
With mind effulgent,

Wilt Thou deny me strength to live for the great
world's betterment?

Or am I sent,

Merely as a weary burden to the earth to be bent?

For a body that leaps to obey the touch of the
mind,

For a mind free of desires blind,

For a life that into the ever-new for ever burns,

And a heart that yearns

To sing Your praise e'en if fire the body maim,

And a will unshaken, wedded to its aim,

For these I pray.

Speak, Mother, grant them, what stands in the
way?

Nallathore vinai seithe

¹ Sakti, the Power Supreme.

² An Indian stringed musical instrument.

THE COTTAGER AND HIS WIFE

'The Cottager and His Wife' is a short piece rich in the lilt and alliterative effects of a Tamil ballad. The story goes it was suggested to the poet on a stormy night when he remembered an old house at Puducheri (Pondicherry) in which he had lived for a time.

Wife:

The storm whirls,
The sea swirls,
Waken, my dear, waken!
Through window and door,
On our bed on the floor,
The lashing rain is shaken.

Cottager:

The sky leaps angry red,
Earth quivers in dread,
Unto the Mother we pray.
May her grace,
Save us apace,
From the tearing elements' play.

Wife:

But yesterday,
In yonder hut we lay.
Had we stayed there tonight,
What had been our fate?
Death came, a storm of hate,
It was held by divine might.

Katradikkuthu kadal kumuruthu

'POET, SING OF ME'

Sing and sear with a song,
The sickness and poverty of the land;
Sing and forge with a song
The peoples of the earth into one love knit band.
Sing, poet!
Open with the new song's measure
The stream of rhythm and melody,
Of the wonder and the treasure
Of kalpana¹ and bliss.

So they say.
And for the song to work the national weal,
The song of the higher way,
For sowing sweetness in a song
And joy in the rhythmic word,
I turn with flaming ardour to the Muse
And then, the Mother's voice is heard:
'No, my poet, sing of me'.

Here comes the rain;
The clouds huddle in the sky and it is dark;
The lightning flows in a flashing curve,
And the north wind is a bark.
I turn to sing of this, this miracle of the descent
of Heaven's waters,

¹ The creative and shaping imagination of the poet.
A word rich in association.

And my words stray away.
 They sing 'Victory to her!
 The wind and the rain, they are the Mother's play.'
 The Mother!
 Beyond the bourne of the word she lies;
 And yet all words to Her she ties.
 They who can see light in the womb of darkness,
 Consciousness in stone,
 A moment at rest in the ceaseless flow of time,
 And the flash thrown
 Of Indra's Vajra¹ from a blade of grass,
 They, only they, can see.
 And yet, strange! she calls:
 'Poet, sing of me.'

Nattumakkal piniyum varumaiyum

¹ Vajra, the weapon of Indra, Lord of Swarga, is considered as irresistibly hard. The idea is that he who sees in a soft blade of grass the force symbolised as Indra's Vajra touches the Real.

A SPAN OF EARTH

An idyllic picture of the simple life of a poet.

A span of earth, no more;
And there,
On that tiny spot,
A house fair,
Graceful-pillared, white-terraced,
For me meet,
With a well, a palm branch swaying,
And cocoanuts sweet.

Palms! Some ten or twelve
Near by;
The moonlight, like a pearly flame,
Dancing high;
Leaning softly to my ear,
The koel's cry;
And stirring my heart to gladness,
The young south wind's sigh.

Beside me, shedding the grace of song,
A woman true;
And in the joy of our commingling,
Poetry's hue;
There guarding us, Mother,¹ in that lonely waste,

¹ Para Sakti, the Power Supreme.

Thy protecting arm;
And swaying high the hearts of men,
My poem's charm.

Kani nilam vendum

SUNSET

This piece is from *Panchali Sapatam* (Panchali's Vow), an epic fragment in five cantos. On the way to Hastinapura, Arjuna, one of the Pandavas, and Draupadi, his queen, witness the glory of a sunset. Arjuna is addressing Draupadi here.

The description in the Tamil original is noteworthy for the thrill, the 'fine frenzy' that it breathes.

Arjuna:

The sun rolls down
Immeasurably swift
Towards the nadir of the sky.
Look! Dark-haired one,¹
Kali, the Mother,
Has melted down a million lightning streaks
And cast this flaming disc;
She whirls it now.
A bright green wheels in front of the supernal
glory.
What wondrous green, a green not of this
earth!
And from the circling flame, jagged diamond
tongues
Shoot forth intermittent.
Oh, but this is a poem that the Mother is
weaving.

¹ Draupadi is referred to.

Rise up, my love, pray,
'May this last for ever and ever.'

Clouds crowd on the glowing sun encircling
him.

They burn.

Colours break out, will no one tell me their
secret?

They burn.

What shapes, what subtle tones!

Liquid fire. Streams of molten gold.

Burning gold isles.

Look, in their midst blue lagoons.

What multitudinous shades of blue,

Innumerable reds, legions of blacks and greens,

And here a black monster towering mighty and
huge.

In the heart of the pools of blue,

Gold boats dancing.

Black peaks laced with golden light;

And there in the sea of darkness, wave on wave,

Gold whales prancing.

A riot of light, turn where I may,

A riot, an ineffable glory of colour.

Adivanatte angu parithikkolam

CONQUEST

What reaches the eye,
Cannot the hand reach out to it?
The sky seen from the earth,
Can we not make it our own, is it beyond us?
O primal force
That fills sky and earth, eye and mind!
Are we merely to dream and dream
And toil
And in the end slump in a futile heap?

'All that the heart yearns for,
All gifts,
Glory and merit and all else noble
Can be ours
Yea, if only we conquer self.'
So spake the sages
Ages ago.

And we who hear now and know,
Are we to stand, listless, nerveless,
Sunk into nothing?
Is it beyond us, this power,
The power to win
And rule the self?

Kannil theriyum porulai

THE GREAT LOVER

God is the Great Lover and the individual soul seeking Him is the love-lorn woman of the poem.

Like a worm
Dangling at the end of a line,
Like a flame
Quivering, shuddering in the open,
So did my heart throb,
And like a caged bird,
I pined alone.
And all things desirable
Turned bitter and hateful to me.

I lay on my bed
Alone.
I wearied even of mother's presence.
And you, my friends,
You talk and you talk
Endlessly of nothing.
Your company,
It frightens me,
Yea, like fell disease.

I taste no food,
Nor close my wearied eye in sleep.
Strange, but I dislike fragrance
And turn away from a flower.

I am in nothing steady,
And I grow confused and wild.
Nothing draws me,
Even for a space;
Joy is gone.

Milk turns bitter in my mouth,
And the soft bed is a bunch of thorns.
The sweet babbling of the parrot
Is a pain in the ear, past bearing.
The vaidyas gathered round me,
They shook their heads and said
'There is no hope';
And an astrologer came,
And he looked wise,
And said that the stars were to blame.

And then one day,
I dreamt
Some one came.
Who He is, I know not,
And He touched my heart;
I woke up to ask him
'Who are you?'
But He had vanished
Leaving in my heart
The thrill of a new delight.

And I felt calm
And grew wondrous well;
And the house and all else,
They turned in a moment wondrous fair.
Desire sprang up again
And sweetness;

Fear went
And beauty was born.

Whenever I think of it,
Just where He touched me,
Comes flooding a sense of infinite soothing,
A new peace.
I think and think
And ask myself, 'Who is He?'
And lo! before my eye
Stands
The Form of The Lord.

Toondil puzhuvinaippole

A LOVE MESSAGE

The message is from an agonised heart seeking Him.
It begins on a note of wounded dignity ill-sustained and
ends in a broken cry.

Go, my dear, go to him, and let me
Know his heart;
And then, then, if need be, we shall do,
I know not what.

We will remain single, my dear,
All our days;
Or there are other kings here; we can
Go their ways.

To the king who breaks the plighted word,
No heart beats true;
What has he found, ask him, my dear, what wrong
We should rue.

To light this mad passion and then to hide,
Has he face?
Old Ponni spoke true: 'His form is a lie.'
Ah, how base!

Alone by the river, all that he spoke to me,
Doth he now spurn?
Tell him, I shall trumpet it to the ends of the earth,
Let all men learn.

The tricks he plays with simple herdswomen,
The craft he's got,
Tell him, we, the daughters of the sword,
We need them not.

To be born a maid, my dear, it is sad,
Passing sad;
Ah, but the tune he played, it leaves me not, it
drives
My poor heart mad.

Thinking ever of him, the faithless, I grow
Heavy as clod.

Go, my dear, learn his mind and then, then,
There's God.

Kannan mana nilayai

TO THE BELOVED

The poet conceives of God as his Beloved in this and the succeeding three poems, and speaks as an impassioned lover.

Thou art the leaping light, my dear, and I
The eye roving free.
Thou art gleaming wine, my dear,
And I the drunken bee.
I strive to speak of the glory thou art
But words fade into quiet;
Thou art a splendour from Heaven, my dear,
A Nectarine riot.

Thou art the vina, my dear, and I
The playing finger's cunning;
Thou art a jewel, my dear,
And I the gem flash running.
Wherever I turn, my dear,
The world with thy love-light is rife;
Thou art sovereign queen, my dear,
The anchor of my life.

Thou art heavenly rain, my dear, and I
The dancing peacock's glee;
Thou art sweet honey, my dear, and I
The cup filled with thee.
Thy bright face sheds all round

An inner peace divine;
Thou art beauty flawless, my love,
Deathless passion-wine.

Thou art the fragrance, my dear,
And I the opening flower;
Thou art the meaning of what is spoken,
And I the rich word-dower.
Near to me and yet distant as the orbs of heaven,
How can I thy beauty capture?
Oh, thou art the luscious ripeness of the fruit,
A rousing, conquering rapture.

Thou art moonlight, my dear,
And I the joyous sea;
Thou art the ground note of my life,
And I the song to thee.
I think and think but no, my dear,
Thou art beyond compare;
Thou art the light of my eye, my dear,
Ambrosial fare.

Payumoli nee enakku

KANNAMMA—MY LOVE

Kannan is Lord Krishna, the Supreme. Kannamma, the feminine form of the name, Kannan, is here given by the poet to God.

As I sat on the terrace in the gloaming awhile,
And wistfully gazed at the sea and the sky,
I saw afar the circling heavens high
Kiss the sea's hem and clasp it with a smile.
Within the entwining blue my mind was caught
And all unconscious of time's ceaseless flow
Basking idly in the streaming day-dreams' glow
I sat wrapt in peace and thought, myself forgot.

And there, somebody softly stole to me,
And behind me standing, closed my eyes.
I felt the soft hands and in a flash was wise;
I knew her by the fragrance of her silk saree,
I knew her by the joy that within me welled,
I knew her by the beat of our kindred hearts.
'Oh, take thy hands away, Kannamma. Thy arts,'
I cried, 'are of no avail.' Her hands I held.

And then, while her laughter tinkled, I freed my
eye,

And turning, drew her to me and said 'Behave'.
'What did you find in the rolling ocean's wave?
Whatever did you find in the blue of the sky?

And what in the whirling foam, its twist and
break,

And among the tiny bubbles that flash and dart?
By conning space day by day, part by part,
What good have you got, tell me, she spake.

In the rolling ocean's wave, I saw thy face;
And only thy face in the broad expanse of sky,
And amidst the foam as it whirled and broke high;
And but thy face in the tiny bubble's race.
Naught did I see but thy infinite grace
In my study of the one in all its strands;
And when thy laughter tinkled and I moved thy
hands,
And turning, clasped thee, again I saw thy face.

Malai pozhudil oru medai misaye

‘WHY DO YOU COVER YOUR EYES?’

Why do you cover your eyes, my love, why?
The scion of a kingly line,
Are you ashamed, I wonder, of this unworthy
lover?

Or do you think I am only a weanling
Too young for woman's love?
As in a passion of longing, drunk with your beauty,
I tear your coloured veil asunder,
I know not why, with your hands,
You hide your eyes, my love.

Have I not met you when you were a maid,
And kissed and kissed you yet again
Till your cheeks were red?
Are we strangers, you to me and I to you?
Are not our two lives fated to mingle as one?
He who has broken your veil,
Will he now fear to brush your hand away?
How could you think me as apart from you?
Of a pair of eyes,
Tell me, will one feel shy of the other?

They are not for you,
The old worn-out stories that men tell their loves.
When song and sruti¹ mate,
Do they stop and squander time in courtesies?

¹ The ground note serving as the base for Indian melodies.

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Does moonlight coming with outstretched arms,
Pause to praise before embracing the sky?
And as fire bites into the log of wood,
Does it stop to mouth a courtly word?

I have met them,
Hear what they say, the knowing and the wise:
'Our love is not of yesterday,
It is old, a legend old as time.
You came to the earth as Rama,¹
And I followed you as the Princess of Golden
Mitila.
You came down as the Lord of the Flute,
Raining ambrosia,
And I was Partha.²
You were Narasinga,
When you came to slay the brute in Hiranya,
And I was his son.³

¹God, the 'Paramatman' (Supreme Spirit), descends to the earth in a number of 'avatars'. In the Rama avatar, Rama marries Sita, foster-daughter of Janaka, King of Mitila.

²The Lord of the Flute is Lord Krishna, one of the avatars of the Supreme. Partha is Arjuna, the Pandava prince, who was Krishna's friend and to whom Krishna gave the Bhagavad Gita (Song Celestial) on the battle-field of Kurukshetra.

³In the avatar of Narasinga, Vishnu, the Supreme, came to the earth to destroy the evil asura, Hiranya. Hiranya's son Prahlada was a great devotee of the Lord.

Then you grew as the Buddha
 And I reached you as Yasodara's bright woman-
 hood¹

This is what they say,
 And they are versed in sastras;²
 They know, they cannot be wrong;
 Our love is an arc of the Eternal, my dear,
 It will live to the end of time.
 And still, you cover your eyes, my love,
 I know not why.

Mannar kulattil pirandavalai

¹Yasodara, the wife of Prince Siddhartha who later became the Buddha. The Buddha is considered as one of the avatars of Vishnu by certain sections of Hindus.

The poet's point is that the individual soul (Jivatman) has ever been seeking and loving the Supreme Spirit (Paramatman).

²The Hindu sciences.

THE TRYST

'On the marge, south of the pool,
Where the champaks blow,
Wait for me, I'll come' thou said,
'In the moon's white glow'.
Thou'st broken thy word, my love,
I am wild with pain;
Thy phantom mocks me as I turn
Seeking thee in vain.

Hot is my body; and my head
Is all in a whirl;
The madding moonlight clasps the sky
With arms of pearl.
The world is wrapt in a quiet,
Steeped in sleep;
I alone writhe in a hell
Of agony deep.

The watchmen at thy gate
Are ever aware;
Though thy slave, I cannot hope
To enter there.
What checks, what tyranny, what
A stifling chain!
The Queen of Fairness is torn
By shame and pain.

To meet and never to part;
And all the night,

To be thrilled again and yet again

With thy body bright;

And to lay my yearning, to reach

Joy, song, ecstasy!

No, no, I've not walked that way

Leading to thee.

Teerta karaiyinile

KANNAN—MY FATHER

He sent me to this earth;
But there in the sphere of Mercury
Are my brethren.
And in the several worlds that roll in boundless
space
Keeping the Law,
Those who live and have their free being
Are my kinsfolk.
Of his wealth, there is no end;
Of the gold in his treasury, there is no measure;
Of his wisdom, who is wise?
And the sweetness of his poetry is infinite.
Of his qualities, there is no count. But now
and then,
The red gleam of madness breaks from him
And those who tread the path of good
Are dipped in agony.
Those who know him not
Throw about the names they call him by,
And sink in endless quarrel.
They call him the Lord of the Gods,
But what do they know?
He is of us.
Child of the warriors,
Playmate of cowherds,
God of the brahmin,
Claimed as kin by those who buy and sell,
He is of us, of every one of us.

His ways are strange. He is dark,
But golden maids rejoice in his love.
He goes his untrammelled ways,
And laughs at the theories empty and false,
That men weave of him.
He is the friend of the poor and the lowly;
And his anger flames
Against the rich drunk with their goods.
He scatters wealth
Among those who stand unshaken in sorrow and
pain.

Wayward,
A mind every moment, a way every day,
He seeks the waste,
And in unending story and song
Kills his endless time.

The Vedas, he wove them;
But their strands are not spun of men's speech.
The emptiness that men call the scriptures
Is not his word.
And yet, strange though it be,
All the words that men utter
Are his gospel.

'Those who stand high
In virtue, knowledge and righteous action,
They are the higher caste.
All other talk of high and low', he says,
'Is false.
Burn this untruth out,
Stamp on the ashes,
And good will spring on earth'.

He is old, immeasurably old.
 Yet, the brightness of his youth is unfading.
 Neither sorrow nor age has he,
 Nor weariness, nor disease, nor fear.
 Having no leanings, taking no sides,
 He stands detached, transcendent,
 And sees with joy the working out of infinite
 design.
 Fie, he cries,
 To those who go to him broken with pain,
 And then heaps them over with tenderness.
 Those who endure the rack of body and mind,
 Their patience he loves;
 Those who turn only to the joy of things,
 On them he showers, rejoicing,
 Joy on joy,
 Bliss.

Poomikkku enai anuppinan

KANNAN—MY SERVANT

Forgetting every generous bonus,
They still pile up demands upon us.
When work is heaviest, on that day,
Quiet, at home, they stay away.
“Why were you absent yesterday?”
We ask; and we are answered duly :
“A scorpion in a pot, Sir, truly,
Bit me with its teeth most cruelly !
My good wife, Sir, the best of women,
Was sore possessed by an evil demon !
It was the twelfth day ceremony
After the death of my poor granny !”
Such disobedience, and lies in dozens;
Such whispering in corners with our dear
cousins !
Our inner chamber’s small disgraces
Loud they proclaim in public places.
They tell the world with drumbeats—yes,
ah me !
If we run somewhat, short of sesame.
Yes; trouble and bother are all we gather
From servants; and yet we would far rather
Have a bad servant than none at all;
For without servants no work is done at all.
To me thus musing, sad and serious,
Came a lad from somewhere mysterious.
“I’m a shepherd,” he said; and on he did rattle
“Your children I’d cherish and graze your
cattle;
Your house I’d sweep, your lamp I’d light,

And all your biddings do always right;
I'd keep with care your jewels and clothes;
And lovely lullabies I'd compose
And sing them; and dance and play, it may be,
To the great delight of little baby.
On robber-infested paths of the forest,
By day or night, in straits the sorest,
With you I'd wander and guard you from
harm,
An artless, unlettered rustic, I am;
Yet something of fencing, boxing, wrestling
I know; but nothing at all of embezzling!"
He paused for breath. At once I spoke,
"Say, what is your name?" He answered,
"Folk

Call me Kannan, not much of a name!"

Stalwart he stood there, firm of frame,
With eyes gleaming goodness and words that
bound him
To me for ever in love. "I've found him,"
I told myself, "the Boy I've been after."
For my heart was filled with silent laughter.
And turning to him, I said, half-taunting
"Tall is your talk and full of vaunting.
You swear I'd find it most advantageous
To be your master; but, what are your
wages?"
"Young though I look, I have lived for ages
With no wedded wife, no children to earn for.
Your love is enough; it is love I yearn for,
Not lucre!" he said in a voice impassioned.
Overjoyed I engaged this foolish, old-fashioned
Fellow to serve me.

Since then, I own,

The lad's love for us has, day by day, grown;
And the good he has done no words can render
As the eyelids guard—alert and tender—
The eyes, he tends my family.
Not once have I heard him grumble. But he
Sweeps the street and cleans the rooms;
And even the housemaids he presumes
To chide and control! And to my children,
A tutor, nurse, doctor, he does bewildering
Services manifold. He buys plenty
Of milk and butter and all things dainty
And stocks my pantry, somehow or other.
To the women he is like a loving mother;
And to me a friend, guide, teacher, brother.
A seeming servant, in deed a god,
This shepherd lad, from somewhere abroad,
Has come to me—for my merit's reward!
When did I do such penance hard?
From the hour that Kannan set his foot
Upon my doorstep, I have put
Away from me all thought and care.
My burdens are now his to bear.
Wealth, youth, strength, honour and renown,
Learning, wisdom, poetry, the crown
Of communion divine, and Shiva's clear,
Calm brightness overwhelm me here.
Oh! joy, that as a servant-boy
Kannan I took in my employ!
I've seen, I've seen with my own eye
His splendour. Yet I wonder why,
Why should Kannan serve me? Why?

Kooli miha ketpar